

Is Centralization Always Bad?



a short paper by

Kaunteya das

a member of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness

Founder-*Ācārya*: His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda



EYE of the STORM

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When the subject of centralization comes up, some ISKCON devotees are quick to quote the famous letter by Srila Prabhupada to Karandhara¹ (22 Dec 1972):

Regarding your points about taxation, corporate status, etc., I have heard from Jayatirtha you want to make big plan for centralization of management, taxes, monies, corporate status, bookkeeping, credit, like that. I do not at all approve of such plan. Do not centralize anything. Each temple must remain independent and self-sufficient.

Some devotees seem to think, “Centralization is bad. Full stop. The discussion is over – never to be revisited again for the next 10,000 years.”

But is it truly so? Are we sure that the topic of centralization is fully covered by the simple *sutra* “Do not centralize anything”? Did Srila Prabhupada ever write anything supporting centralization? Did Srila Prabhupada ever say something like “In that case, centralized management is preferable”?

Actually, he did; but let’s first carefully consider what kind of centralization Srila Prabhupada condemned in the Karandhara letter.

¹ Srila Prabhupada and Karandhara on the cover.

Tamal Krishna Maharaja explained that Srila Prabhupada was referring to the following:

In March 1972, without consulting Prabhupada, eight of the twelve GBC members held a meeting in New York to centralise ISKCON's management. The plan was to centralise control in the hands of each zonal secretary by giving the GBC member complete control over the temples' finances. All funds collected were to be sent to a head office, which would then allot expenditures to each temple.

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This was the kind of centralization Srila Prabhupada rejected in the Karandhara letter, a centralization so total and suffocating that it would kill the spirit of transcendental entrepreneurship so central to spreading Krishna consciousness. That kind of centralization would have turned all temples into vassal entities in which, Srila Prabhupada continues in that letter,

one shall dominate and distribute benefits to the others and they do nothing but beg from you and you provide.

In the Karandhara letter Srila Prabhupada explains,

Each temple must remain independent and self-sufficient. That was my plan from the very beginning.

This brings us to the question “Would Srila Prabhupada support a form of centralization—in the sense of concentration of organizational power—in which the temples would remain independent and self-sufficient? History shows that Srila Prabhupada did approve and promote such centralization.

But before we explore Srila Prabhupada's statements on this matter, let's spend a few moments defining terms. One dictionary definition of

centralize is “To bring under a single, central authority.” This introduces the next question: central to what? Something could be central to the whole world, to a country, to a city, or even to a neighborhood. It could be an authority central to one department among many in a large temple. There are many centers of activity in our movement. In fact, ISKCON temples are often called *centers*. Should we reject the very idea of, say, *temple president* because having one would represent the dreaded centralization of power?

When statements such as “do not centralize anything” are cited dogmatically and quoted out of context, we end up with the paradox of having to reject all forms of consolidation of authority, at all levels – local, national, or international – because Srila Prabhupada said, “Do not centralize *anything*.”

Fortunately, Srila Prabhupada was a lucid, intelligent leader whose instructions make perfect sense when understood properly, in reference to time, place, context, and interlocutors. Two weeks after writing the famous Karandhara letter, Srila Prabhupada again wrote about centralization, this time to Damodara (9 Jan 1973):

Regarding the several smaller temples being dependent upon the central temple of Washington, D.C., that is up to you to decide, but so far I am concerned, I have not got much stock in such centralized management or organization ... But for reasons of spreading Krsna Consciousness movement, we may sometimes centralize, just like the books and money for BBT are managed by Karandhara in Los Angeles.

And that’s the same Karandhara to whom, two weeks earlier, Srila Prabhupada had written, “Do not centralize anything”!

In the letter to Damodara, Srila Prabhupada goes on to explain that when it would be impractical for a local entity to perform a function beneficial to the whole of ISKCON (or to a large part of it), then it is better to centralize, as in the case of the BBT:

In that case, for more than one man to be dealing with Dai Nippon, overseeing the general production and financial condition of the books, if that were left for each temple to manage, there would be great difficulty and the books would get neither printed nor paid for nor distributed widely. So in that case, centralized management is preferable.

And Srila Prabhupada showed that “centralized management is preferable” in other cases also, such as with the *guru-kula*. It would have been impractical in the early 1970s for every temple to establish a school; therefore Srila Prabhupada established the *guru-kula* in Dallas (and then in Vrindavana), to serve the educational needs of a large number of devotees in different places.

Srila Prabhupada did not welcome centralization when it would decrease the devotees’ sense of individual responsibility. He wrote to Karandhara (22 Dec 1972),

There must be always individual striving and work and responsibility.

And to Damodara (9 Jan 1973) he wrote:

[O]ur main business is to train up men to be self-sufficient and competent in many ways to carry on the preaching work, not to make them into specialists or to minimize their responsibility.

To determine if a form of centralization could be beneficial or not, we should ask ourselves, “Would the administrators involved minimize

their responsibility and personal growth as leaders?” In the letter to Damodara Srila Prabhupada also wrote,

I never wanted that any of my temples shall be dependent upon the other temples.

Both the BBT and the guru-kula pass the responsibility and independence test. They both serve a collective need without stifling individual creativity and accountability. To Tamal Krishna Srila Prabhupada had written (13 Oct 1969):

As far as possible the centers should act freely, but conjointly. They must look forward to the common development. That should be the principle.

“Common development” can take various forms—local, national, continental, or global. For instance, we could have international information campaigns or international training programs. With some common finance we could help struggling temples in developing countries. The funds for such centralized efforts could come from individuals and temples in different parts of the world. Thus the temples would “act freely, but conjointly” and “for the common development.” The temples receiving the help would remain independent, and those giving the help would increase their sense of responsibility, expanding it globally.

When we look at centralization in this way, it starts to appear as something beneficial for the movement; even necessary for it to spread. In fact, systematic avoidance of a global consciousness and international efforts at cooperation could eventually foster provincialism and parochialism, undermining the cohesion and potential of the movement.

Efforts at centralization in which energy is consolidated for the benefit of the whole embody the spirit of cooperation Srila Prabhupada consistently promoted. Such joint global ventures increase the sense of responsibility of individuals and temples for the common good—and everyone gains from such coordinated efforts, with benefits cascading down, when properly managed, to every nook and corner of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (which now suffers in many areas from a lack of concerted organization).

Here we see two examples of Srila Prabhupada's personally promoting some forms of centralization: on 30 November 1970 Srila Prabhupada wrote to Karandhara:

Now I want that all administration may be done by all of you 12 GBC members all over the world. Always keep in touch and consult matters all together for practical execution.

And to Jagadisa Srila Prabhupada wrote (6 May 1976):

You have some experience now with Gurukula, so your full-time engagement should now be how to organize the Gurukulas all over the world. Do it very nicely and thoughtfully. So far your plans are concerned for the same, you can have them conjointly approved with the other GBC. In this way, you may make the Gurukula program your portfolio and organize it throughout the world.

The above examples show the intended central authority and global reach of the Governing Body Commission and of the Ministry of Education, both personally established by Srila Prabhupada.

Dear reader, next time you hear about centralization, please, don't instinctively reject it or demonize it; you might be throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The bathwater is the danger of making people psychologically and financially dependent; the baby is the

capacity to produce effective common national and international initiatives by cooperation—a “Prabhupada axiom.”

Suppose the GBC wanted to assist outreach activities throughout the ISKCON world by widely circulating well-produced, well-tested PowerPoint presentations. Devotees on every continent would receive professionally designed, expertly written, impactful presentations ready to be used locally. This could represent centralized effort that would benefit everyone without limiting local autonomy (and which would unburden the individual presenters from creating their own presentations from scratch...).

Or suppose the GBC produced a conclusive booklet on the position of Srila Prabhupada as the Founder-Acarya of ISKCON (in fact, production of such a booklet is already in motion). After printing the booklet (in multiple languages), the GBC could then oversee a global effort to make it available and read by all devotees. This would be another example of a centralized effort benefiting everyone.

We can go on and on with examples of centralized projects that would enrich and equip the whole of ISKCON.

Conclusion

While centralization may present some risk, it can also bestow huge benefits. Centralized initiatives can benefit the global devotee community when they are undertaken for the common good, in the spirit of service, and without restricting local autonomy and creativity. Dogmatically, fanatically opposing all forms of centralization constitutes a terrible disservice to Srila Prabhupada’s mission.

Om Tat Sat